



A Few Aspects of Acquiring Serials

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IN THE FAMILY of graphic media, serial publications are brash upstarts of a relatively recent age. Although their 300th anniversary will not occur for another decade, the impact of serials as a medium for the mass dissemination of information to laymen and specialists alike has been incalculable.

The effect of serials on libraries has been no less profound. At the time of their first appearance, a new phase of the acquisitions program of unprecedented scope and complexity came into being. Ever since then, libraries have been trying, with varying degrees of success, to cope with the many problems associated with the development of collections of these indispensable publications.

The birth of serials occurred in the latter part of the seventeenth century, in an era characterized by some as the Golden Century and more aptly by others as the Century of Genius. *Journal des Sçavans*, which was started in Paris on January 5, 1665, is generally considered to be the first independent periodical. The developments in learning and scholarship of the age were of tremendous significance to libraries and to those who used them. It may be worthwhile, therefore, to dwell briefly on the circumstances and the temper of the times which witnessed so many revolutionary changes.

In her book *The Role of Scientific Societies in the Seventeenth Century*,¹ Martha Ornstein points out that this was the age in which scientific inquiry was developed as the charlatanry and curiosity of the alchemist and the magician were supplanted by methodical investigation. It was during this period, when such men as Boyle, Galileo, and Newton were busily engaged in uprooting superstition and discarding time-honored traditions, that the modern experimental scientist was born.

Hand in hand with other developments came a far-reaching change in the means of communication employed by scholars. Formerly they had relied solely on private correspondence, some of which was writ-

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ten in cipher to keep the meaning from unauthorized readers. According to Miss Ornstein, this arrangement was unsatisfactory because it depended too much on friendly or hostile feelings, and at times on geographical contiguity, as to whether or not information about important discoveries was disclosed to the world at large.²

Just how well serials filled a real need of the times can be gathered from the promptness with which *Journal des Sçavans* was copied and from the enthusiastic acceptance of it and similar publications. Two months afterward, the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society of London was started. According to Barnes, 330 periodicals were founded in seven European countries by 1730. Of the 113 specialized journals which appeared during this time, 30 were devoted to the natural sciences, 18 were general in scope, 11 were essentially medical, and one was devoted to mathematics and physics.³ Since the early part of the eighteenth century, tens of thousands of serials have appeared, to the confusion of anyone attempting to keep track of them. To make the situation even more chaotic, each year many discontinuations, mergers, separations, and other changes occur. As noted in the second edition of the *World List of Scientific Periodicals*, "No single library receives more than a portion of these; and even all the libraries in a centre so great as London do not together contain them all."⁴

The 1953 edition of *Ulrich's Periodicals Directory* lists approximately 14,000 titles, an increase of 4,000 entries over those included in the 1951 edition.⁵ This expansion is due in part to a more complete coverage of foreign publications. According to the third edition of the *World List of Scientific Periodicals*, the number of listings "proved to be of the order of 50,000."⁶ The *Union List of Serials* is reported to contain between 115,000 and 120,000 entries.⁷

Advances in subscription prices of serials, especially during the recent inflationary years, have made it more and more difficult for libraries to meet the mounting costs involved. Actually, however, the situation has not been without its advantages. Price increases have had the beneficial effect of encouraging libraries to forego the expensive luxury of subscriptions to publications of questionable value, and to examine carefully their policies with respect to the purchase of multiple copies.

The Association of Research Libraries Serials Committee has estimated, on the basis of a random sampling of journals, that subscription costs rose 27 per cent from 1939 to 1950.⁸ Since 1949-50 the Iowa State College Library has needed a total increase of 22 per cent in funds for books and serials, including back sets, to maintain its normal

A Few Aspects of Acquiring Serials

acquisitions program. According to figures given in the 1954 edition of the *American Library Directory*, the appropriations of 1,374 college and university libraries for books and periodicals were increased an average of 35 per cent from 1950 to 1953.⁹

Special mention should be made of German scientific serials and the long years of discussion which have centered upon the pricing of these important works. As early as 1921 the American Library Association Committee on Book Buying was taking a lively interest in what was referred to as "the German system of discrimination against foreign book buyers."^{10, 11} According to Downs,¹² the first formal action protesting the high prices of German publications may have been taken at a meeting of the Medical Library Association on June 10, 1924. Ten years later the depreciation of the dollar resulted in further talk about cancellation of subscriptions to German serials. Timely relief of a substantial character was obtained in 1935 when C. H. Brown, chairman of the A.L.A. Sub-committee on German Periodicals, went to Berlin to talk with German publishers and officials. Soon afterward, the German government granted a 25 per cent reduction in prices of all German books and periodicals sold to libraries in the United States. Other concessions were also secured, as set forth in the final report of the sub-committee.¹³

Following World War II, criticism with respect to the pricing of German scientific serials was renewed, much of it this time being directed at one well-known publisher. Protests were based on the claim that price increases per page of the firm's medical periodicals were exorbitant. The A.R.L. Serials Committee responded by saying that while price increases on a per page basis were substantial they were less than the rise in the cost of living for the corresponding period.¹⁴ Moreover, the committee cited its study of annual total costs rather than per page costs. The results of this study, using the prices charged one library for thirty of the firm's scientific and medical publications, showed a decrease in prices from 1939 to 1950 of 16 per cent.¹⁵

The continued upward spiraling of prices makes it more imperative than ever before that libraries appraise their need of any serial carefully before deciding to acquire it. Evaluation of the most painstaking sort must not only be done at the time of first consideration of each title, new or old, but it must be repeated on a recurring basis as a means of eliminating all serials no longer needed. Evaluation techniques as practiced by libraries generally have been summarized by various writers, including Wilson and Tauber,¹⁶ Lancaster-Jones,¹⁷ and Bixler.¹⁸

Libraries are aided in their selection of serials by noting the presence or absence of titles under study in pertinent indexing and abstracting journals. If a title does not appear, its importance, except possibly on a current basis, is probably doubtful. This criterion, of course, does not apply to new titles. A knowledge of the holdings of a given journal by other libraries in the region, as revealed by union lists, is also helpful as it may enable the library to rely on interlibrary loans, at least temporarily, to meet the needs of its readers.

Quite commonly, useful information is collected by the librarian in charge of interlibrary loans. Judgment must be employed, of course, in using such records to decide whether the need of the publications is only temporary, arising from a special investigation of short duration, or whether it will be a sustained one of sufficient magnitude to justify purchase, if available. Value judgments by readers or librarians or both are also helpful in evaluating serials. Such opinions may be utilized on an individual basis, especially when obtained from subject specialists, or they may be grouped for purposes of statistical comparison and study. Well-known examples of such lists by Waples,¹⁹ Hyde,²⁰ Lyle and Trumper,²¹ and others are present in the literature.

Another technique that is gaining in usage is one known as reference counting, in which the references in selected volumes of key journals are tabulated. The assumption is that the journals cited most frequently are of greater importance than the others. Sometimes these tabulations are also broken down into time spans in order to determine in which periods the references are concentrated. This is a device to ascertain which portions of the journals cited are the most important on the basis of use as reflected by a count of the citations to them.

Gross and Gross²² pioneered in developing the reference counting technique in their study in the field of chemical journals. By checking the *Journal of the American Chemical Society* for 1926, they found that of 3,633 references made to 247 journals, the majority of the citations were to only 28 of the titles. The references were also tabulated by time periods. More recently, Fussler²³ selected the *Physical Review* and the *Journal of the American Chemical Society* as the key journals in his study of the research literature used by chemists and physicists in this country. His emphasis was placed on the use of generalized data on date distribution rather than its association with individual titles.

A widely consulted study based on reference counting is the one made by Brown.²⁴ Lists of the approximately one hundred most-cited journals in a number of subject fields were developed. In chemistry,

A Few Aspects of Acquiring Serials

for example, the seven key journals used in the study included three published in the United States, and one each from Great Britain, France, Germany, and Switzerland. Foreign journals were included in an effort to obtain information which would be more representative of actual research needs than that which is based solely on the use of key journals published in this country. Although this study does not include analysis by time spans, a new edition now in preparation will.

Once serials are selected, the exacting task of securing them as expeditiously and economically as possible must be faced. Basically, the matter is quite simple, as they can be obtained by purchase, on exchange, or as gifts. In general, the highest percentage of them are secured by purchase. The Iowa State College Library, for example, obtains an estimated 50 per cent of its total serials, including periodicals, by purchase; 22 per cent on exchange; and the remaining 28 per cent as gifts, including government documents.

Sometimes a given serial is obtainable only as a direct purchase from the publisher. In other instances the services of dealers are employed on the basis of the quality of service rendered and on the discounts offered. The choice of dealers is also influenced by such additional factors as geographical location, specialization in publications of certain categories, or of countries. Some of the large research libraries are showing a tendency to place their orders for foreign serials with dealers located in the countries where the publications originate. In many such cases the dealers selected are the ones serving as agents for the Farmington Plan. The articles by Bennett and Reichmann in this issue contain more about purchasing in general.

A purchasing matter which has caused some particular concern in the serials field is the practice by certain dealers of computing the prices for foreign publications on the basis of rates of exchange which are higher than the official rates. In the case of German currency, for example, dealers have used rates of exchange for the mark varying from the official 23.8 cents to as high as 30 cents. The practice has been excused on the grounds that it is a convenient device to obtain the extra revenue needed to enable dealers to stay in business. If an amount in excess of the list price is necessary to assure a fair profit, it should be listed separately and suitably identified. In this way, prices charged by various dealers can be compared more easily. Sometimes auditors insist that invoices be fully itemized and that foreign currencies be converted at the official rates of exchange.

In a special report ²⁵ the A.R.L. Serials Committee has taken note of the practice by certain publishers in this country of charging libraries

more for subscriptions to scientific journals than they do members of scientific societies and other individuals. In a later report the committee stated that the differential rates in prospect for new research serials probably would not exceed 20 per cent as compared with the additional charge to libraries of 200 per cent being made by two publications, including a well-known abstracting journal.²⁶ The conclusion was that the situation in general is not yet serious enough to justify a formal protest, but that future broadening of the base and further increases in such differentials would severely impair the functioning of research libraries.

The practice of some foreign publishers in asking payment in dollars from buyers in this country at rates which are considerably in excess of domestic prices is another relatively recent development which is causing serious concern. The matter was discussed in the report of the A.R.L. Serials Committee dated January 26, 1952.²⁷ The committee stated that there can be no objection to the practice of foreign publishers requiring payment in American dollars if such charges do not exceed their own domestic rates plus the postage to the United States, but the increase in rates so far announced has been much greater than this. Unfortunately, this situation seems to be growing worse. With one notable exception, French publishers included in a random sample are increasing the difference.

A comprehensive program of exchanges, a matter discussed at length in this issue by Miss Welch, is an important activity for research libraries. Some publications are available in no other way, and others can be obtained more easily by this means. For example, libraries have experienced great difficulty in obtaining certain scientific serials by subscription from Iron Curtain countries. On the other hand, some of the publications which could not thus be obtained have been acquired with astonishing ease through exchange channels. For example, research workers at one library began calling for volumes of the Czechoslovakian chemical journal *Chemické Listy*. A check of the *Union List of Serials* and inquiries sent to likely sources of information failed to locate a single complete set anywhere in this country. Efforts to purchase the set were fruitless; yet the journal was readily obtained on exchange from the Československá Akademie Věd Ústav Organické Chemie.

Often the weakest part of a library's program of acquisitions is its program of exchanges. The fault may be due to the institution's failure to centralize exchange activities in the hands of the library. In other cases, the librarian may have developed this program only half-heart-

A Few Aspects of Acquiring Serials

edly because of a lack of conviction as to its potential value. Some libraries content themselves with participation in domestic exchanges, including participation in such programs as the Duplicate Exchange Union and cooperation with the United States Book Exchange. Although these steps are not to be minimized, they nevertheless constitute only a minor part of the over-all program of exchanges for research libraries.

Gifts comprise a third category of serial publications for libraries. For the most part, publications secured in this manner are comprised of government documents received on a current basis, back files of periodicals, and occasional gift subscriptions from professional and commercial sources. Back files of periodicals are sometimes presented to libraries as memorials or other gifts. Obviously, gifts of serials should be made in accordance with applicable policy provisions of the acquisitions program. Unneeded first sets or duplicates, especially those offered on impracticable conditions, may well prove to be too costly to process and house in terms of the benefits to be derived from their ownership.

The question of policy with respect to the acquisition of back files of periodicals and other serials is one of the most important matters in the serials field facing libraries today. Librarians have clung too long to the costly fetish that serials sets should be completed without regard to need, and with scant consideration for the sacrifices in funds and shelf room involved. Librarians are not solely to blame. College faculties, for instance, always seem to have at least an interested few who lend their enthusiastic and uncritical endorsement to such practices.

The day will come, if indeed it is not already here, when libraries will be rated less by the completeness of their holdings of serials than by means of a yardstick which takes into account a definitive evaluation of serial holdings both in titles and time spans. Under such a system, a library whose holdings include many unneeded serials will be criticized fully as much as the one found to be lacking in essential publications.

Microreproductions, covered elsewhere in this issue, possess attractive possibilities as a medium of compromise between those librarians who want their serial sets to be complete at all costs and those who rightly feel that there are limits to money and space to be used for this purpose. Libraries have already made a small but significant beginning in substituting microfilms, microcards, and other forms of microtext for the bulky paper editions of little-used serials. The prac-

tice is certain to spread as rapidly as it wins acceptance from library users, many of whom are still openly voicing their dislike of using reading machines.

There will always be whole or partial sets of important serials which some libraries, according to their respective needs, will not want on their shelves either in paper editions or as microtext. Nevertheless, copies of such publications must definitely be a part of the total library resources available within designated geographical contiguities. It is here that cooperative patterns, such as subject specialization and joint holdings, must be made to play an increasingly important role in library development.

The success of such cooperative ventures on a national scale as the Farmington Plan²⁸ and the Library of Congress Cooperative Acquisitions Project,²⁹ both chiefly for books rather than serials, have shown that cooperation will work if meticulously conceived and capably managed. When the eventual potentialities of regional projects, such as the Midwest Inter-Library Center³⁰ and the local arrangements in effect in many parts of the country are also taken into account, there emerges the rudiments of a multi-phased program of cooperation which has promising possibilities of easing the intolerable burdens of individual libraries. The accomplishments to date as well as the possibilities of cooperation are set forth in another paper in this issue.

In conclusion, let it be said quite frankly that the time has come when libraries must face up to the mounting problems stemming from their dependence on serials. The extreme urgency in the situation is due to the rapidly approaching end of relatively unlimited funds for publications and places in which to shelve them. Subscription lists need to be pared to more realistic totals. Cooperative measures must be utilized in providing access to marginal materials. On a back-set basis, libraries should intensify their efforts to weed out serials which are no longer needed, and to substitute space-saving microreproductions of bulky volumes of older but still essential publications. No longer can any library hope to be all things to all persons who enter its doors.

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A Few Aspects of Acquiring Serials

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ROBERT W. ORR

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